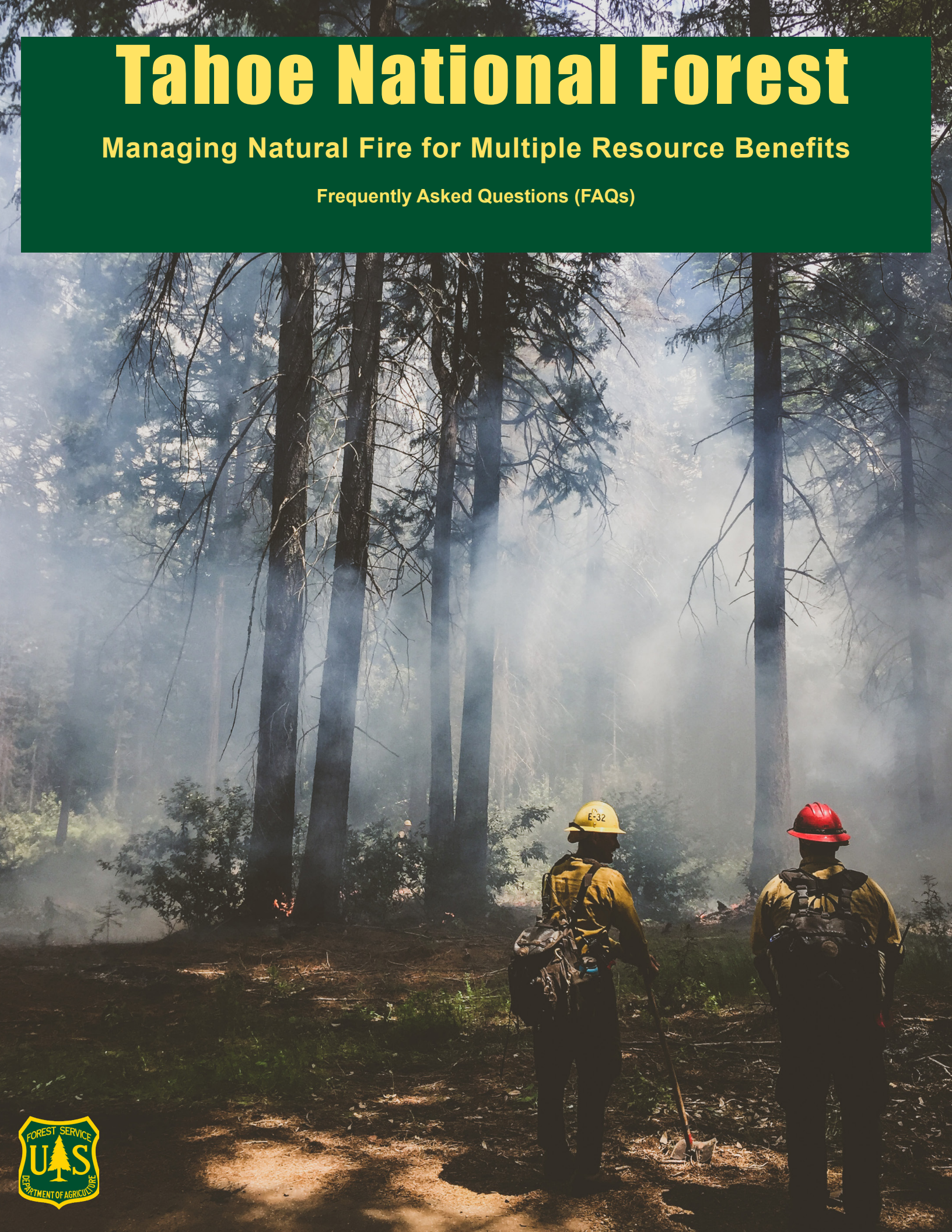
Tahoe National Forest

Managing Natural Fire for Multiple Resource Benefits

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)



What are we doing?

The Tahoe National Forest is proposing to amend the Tahoe National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan to expand opportunities for managing naturally-caused wildfire ignitions (natural fire) under the appropriate conditions to achieve multiple resource benefits while protecting communities and ensuring firefighter safety.

What is the Tahoe National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan?

The Tahoe National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan, often called the 'Forest Plan,' provides the guiding framework for ongoing land and resource management operations within the Tahoe National Forest. The Forest Plan was approved in 1990.The Forest Plan provides only very limited opportunities to use natural fire to achieve multiple resource benefits even though natural fire is a vital ecological process for sustaining the Forest's ecosystems.

What is the historic role of natural fire in the Tahoe National Forest?

Historically, the mixed-conifer forests of the Tahoe National Forest routinely experienced low and medium intensity natural fires. Like nature's cleanup crew, these natural fires reduced the build-up of brush, small trees, and forest litter, such as dead limbs and down trees. Large trees, with fire-resistant bark and their crowns high above the flames, survived low and medium intensity natural fires. Forests like ours in the Tahoe National Forest (and across the Sierra Nevada Mountains) are known as fire-adapted ecosystems because historically they experienced frequent natural fires and depended on them to stay healthy and resilient.

Over the past century, people have been suppressing wildfires, whether naturally-caused or otherwise, throughout the West, including the Tahoe National Forest. This means that low and moderate intensity natural fires have largely been excluded from the Forest. In the absence of low and medium intensity natural fires, forested areas have become overly dense with smaller trees and shrubs and excessive quantities of dead and down woody material. The smaller trees, shrubs, and down woody material that natural fire would have removed have built to unhealthy levels. Due to this buildup, the Tahoe National Forest has become less resilient to insect attacks, drought stress, and high-severity wildfire.

What are the 'multiple resource benefits' that low and medium intensity natural fire can provide?

Fire is an important tool for restoring forest resilience in fire-adapted ecosystems. Modern research conducted within California and across the West recommends re-establishing natural fire as an ecological process to provide multiple resource benefits. These benefits include:

- Enhancing forest resilience to drought, disease, and large, high-severity wildfires
- Stabilizing carbon storage
- Improving watershed health and function
- Cycling nutrients
- Protecting and enhancing wildlife habitat

In addition, enhancing forest resilience to large, high-severity wildfire also provides for community and firefighter safety and protects crucial watersheds that provide hydroelectric power, domestic water supply, and water for downstream agriculture use.

Why are we doing this now?

Under the existing Forest Plan, Fire Managers have little, if any, ability to utilize natural fire anywhere on the Tahoe National Forest to achieve multiple resource benefits. Under the existing Forest Plan, Fire Managers are directed to aggressively suppress fires in nearly all cases. The Forest Plan allows Fire Managers to utilize fire for resource benefits in only a few limited areas of the Forest and only if the fire can be contained within an isolated fuelbed of 5 acres or less, a situation rarely encountered and at a scale too small to achieve meaningful ecological restoration or other resource benefits.

The Tahoe Forest Plan was approved in 1990 when the goal for managing our Forest was very different and our understanding of natural fire's role in fire adapted ecosystems was not well understood. Research over the past two decades has demonstrated that forests without frequent low and medium intensity fires tend to suffer more damage when a large, high-severity wildfire does occur. Large, high-severity wildfires, including the American River Fire Complex (2008), American Fire (2013), and King Fire (2014), have occurred near or within portions of the Tahoe National Forest in recent years.

What will the Tahoe National Forest be able to do under this new amendment?

The purpose of this Forest Plan amendment is to provide Fire Managers with the flexibility to utilize natural fire to achieve ecological and societal benefits when naturally-caused wildfire ignitions occur under the appropriate conditions. In most cases, lightning-ignited natural fires will still be suppressed. However, under the right conditions, the Forest Plan amendment would give Fire Managers more options for managing a natural fire – in some cases, they could decide to utilize natural fire to achieve multiple resource benefits.

How would ‘appropriate conditions’ be determined?

Under the proposed Forest Plan amendment, each natural fire would be evaluated to determine the best fire management strategy. The first priority in all fire management decisions is protecting human life.

After adequately addressing firefighter and public safety, Fire Managers would assess the natural fire’s potential risk to infrastructure and natural and cultural resources. This assessment would consider the location of the fire, condition of the surrounding fuels, current and predicted weather, topography, impacts to visitors and nearby communities, and other complex factors, such as the National Wildfire Preparedness levels and the availability of firefighting personnel and resources. Weather forecasting has continually improved over the past decade. Fire Managers have increased confidence in seven-day forecasts, and they would use this information to more effectively manage fires.

Depending on the outcome of this assessment, Fire Managers could choose to manage the fire with traditional suppression strategies or to utilize natural fire to achieve multiple resource benefits – or both. Indeed, it is possible that one part of a natural fire could be managed utilizing a traditional suppression strategy while another part of the same fire could be managed to achieve multiple resource benefits.

In addition, Fire Managers would take into account the natural fire’s location within the larger landscape. Natural fires occurring in the following types of locations could be more conducive to being managed for resource benefits, provided they occurred under the appropriate conditions:

- Natural fires surrounded by or adjacent to areas previously treated for forest resilience including the removal of hazardous fuels.
- Natural fires surrounded by, or adjacent to, areas previously burned by wildfire.
- Natural fires surrounded by areas which will not propagate fire spread –i.e. exposed granite or high elevation zones.
- Natural fires in remote areas where threats to public health and safety are low.
- Natural fires in areas where traditional fire management and suppression strategies may endanger firefighter safety.
- Natural fires in areas where low or medium intensity fire is expected due to existing fuel conditions.

How would fire managers document their decision to utilize natural fire?

Fire managers would document their management decisions in the Wildfire Decision Support System (WFDSS) utilizing pre-determined wildfire management decision elements. Elements in the WFDSS decision matrix include risk to life and property, air quality and public health, ecological benefits and risks, and local and regional fire activity.

Does utilizing natural fire to achieve multiple resource benefits mean the Tahoe National Forest will just 'let it burn?'

No. The fire management strategy for utilizing natural fire would look and feel very similar to fire management utilizing traditional suppression strategies. Only the specific fire management objectives would change.

In both scenarios, emergency firefighting personal conduct a fire size-up utilizing ground or air resources. In both scenarios, this information is utilized by Fire Managers to develop a fire management strategy. In both scenarios, firefighting resources are ordered on a scale and magnitude to safely and effectively manage the fire.

When managing natural fire to achieve resource benefits, firefighting resources would still be deployed on the ground to construct fireline, conduct burnout operations, or perform a variety of other tactics and strategies to manage the natural fire within a specific area. Air resources could be deployed to assist ground operations and/or to conduct daily monitoring. Public notifications and daily fire updates would still occur. For larger or more complex natural fires, Incident Management teams could be ordered to assist Fire Managers in planning and implementing fire management strategies. All of these operations are similar to fire management utilizing traditional suppression. When managing a natural fire to achieve multiple resource benefits, Fire Managers would also work closely with local air pollution control districts and the California Air Resources Board to monitor and mitigate smoke effects.

What if conditions changed while a natural fire was being managed for resource benefits?

While fuel continuity, favorable meteorology, and adequate staffing would be key factors in managing natural fire to achieve multiple resource benefits, these factors alone would not determine the size or duration of such fires. An ongoing, dynamic risk assessment would be conducted continually throughout the duration of the natural fire to inform real-time adjustments or response actions. This would allow Fire Managers to limit the natural fire at key locations on the landscape and/or apply traditional fire suppression management strategies as needed.

What will happen if the proposed amendment to the Forest Plan is not approved?

If this amendment to the Tahoe National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan is not approved, the Tahoe National Forest will be required to employ the currently required management approach to naturally-caused fire ignitions. In most cases, the Tahoe National Forest will be required to suppress naturally-caused fires. In a few areas of the Forest, naturally-ignited fires may be managed for resource benefits if they occur in an isolated fuelbed and can be limited to 5 acres or less.

If fuel levels continue to build, the Tahoe National Forest could experience more large, high-severity wildfires. Residents and communities could be at risk. Smoke impacts would be significant. Critical wildlife habitat could be lost. Drinking water supplies could be negatively impacted by erosion from severely burned slopes. Millions of tons of greenhouse gases could be released to the atmosphere, contributing to climate change rather than offsetting it. And what used to be forest land could convert to shrubs, permanently altering the Tahoe National Forest landscape that we are used to.

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